

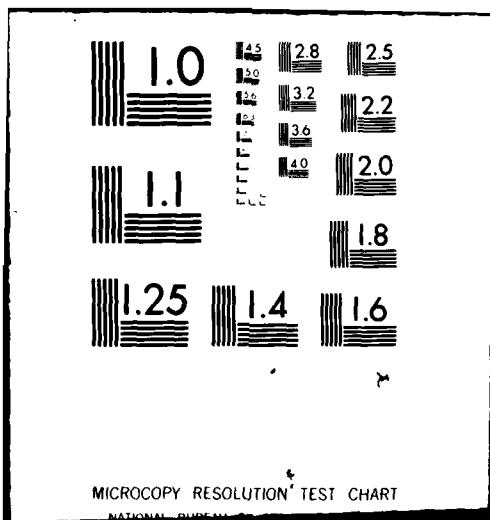
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STRATEGIC STUDIES INSTITUTE
US ARMY WAR COLLEGE
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania

THE FUTURE OF THE ISLAMIC REVIVAL

by

Dr. Shirin Tahir-Kheli

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the Islamic revival and its projection into the year 2000. The author points out that the Islamic resurgence is readily observable in society, political and international spheres. There is clear evidence that the Islamic world will continue to evolve dynamically and will have a larger world influence both politically and economically. Although Islamic beliefs contain a bias against communism, the United States should not assume that it automatically has the friendship of Islamic nations.

FOREWORD

This paper presents the views of the Strategic Studies Institute's Futures Group concerning the Islamic revival and its projection into the year 2000.

This paper was prepared as a contribution to the field of national security research and study. As such, it does not reflect the official view of the US Army War College, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.


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THE FUTURE OF THE ISLAMIC REVIVAL

The discussion of Islamic revival and its projection into the year 2000 makes reference to the past 1400 year history of Islam necessary. This paper will consider briefly the historic traditions and tenets of Islam before going on to discuss the trends and implications of its revival. Following its inception, the Islamic faith spread with phenomenal speed, first within the Arab Peninsula and then through the Eastern world from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean. In the course of a hundred years, it conquered the Byzantine, the Persian and the Indian Empires. For more than a thousand years, from the 7th to the 17th century, the Muslims constituted the dominant political power in the world, providing leadership in a large number of countries in a wide belt stretching from Western Africa, on the Atlantic, to Southeast Asia on the Pacific Ocean.

From the point of view of this paper, the political domination by Arabs and other Muslim people of these territories is of secondary importance; the main point is the ideological conversion of the inhabitants of these countries to the Muslim faith with the result that there are now about 40 countries, the majority of whose population professes the Islamic faith.

There is no doubt that the Muslim world has been largely dormant since the 17th century. This dormancy coincides exactly with the rise of the European nations, which, after the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution, started colonizing Asia and Africa, including many of the Muslim countries.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into the causes of this decline of the Islamic world during the last three centuries, but one can briefly mention a few: the habits of luxury and indulgence among the rulers brought about by the enjoyment of the riches yielded by earlier successes, mutual rivalries and internecine wars and conflicts, indifference to the awakening and rearming of the European nations and, last but not the least, the loss of scientific and technological leadership in the Muslim world and its acquisition by the West during the Industrial Revolution. The following observations are particularly applicable to mainline Sunni Islam.

Islamic Revival: Its Manifestation and Projection

That there is an Islamic revival and resurgence is obvious. One can see its manifestations in the social, political and international spheres. For example, Muslims are once again proud to proclaim their faith and ideology. Indeed, they are becoming even more assertive in this proclamation as is evident from a recent instance when, as the spokesman for the Islamic Conference at the 1980 opening of the UN General Assembly, General Zia-Ul-Haq, President of Pakistan, opened his speech with a recitation from the Holy Quran (as is customary at all national and international gatherings of the Muslim countries). This assertiveness is helped by the fact that the number of Muslim people throughout the world, including the United States, is increasing rapidly and the indications are that this trend is likely to continue into the year 2000. Equally important the per capita income of Muslim countries has risen dramatically in the last decade and, to coin a phrase, so has their per capita strategic importance by virtue of the Western dependence on their fossil (oil)

resources. As a result, Muslims are no longer stereotyped as the poor, ignorant and starving peoples who were objects of contempt only a few decades ago; instead, they are beginning to command due attention and consideration in international affairs.

Causes of Islamic Revival and Its Continuation Into 2000 A.D.

The causes leading to the resurgence of Islam are an important consideration for this paper because its future is ensured by the fact that the conditions which presaged its revival are likely to accelerate towards the year 2000. If one analyzes these causes, it would appear that they belong to two categories: external and internal.

The external causes stem from disenchantment with the secular philosophy and way of life of the western countries. While this philosophy helped bring about material progress and made man's physical life much easier than ever before, it did not, however, give him any happiness in the real sense, nor peace of mind and contentment. These are essential qualities of man's being and are considered (in the Islamic faith) as being the preeminent requisites for a satisfactory life on earth. Just as significant, however, is the concept of the life hereafter--and the Western emphasis on materialism militated seriously against achieving salvation.

On another level, recurring wars of horrendous destruction and the conditions in Western societies emerging after these wars also demonstrated that the Western outlook on life was seriously flawed. It inevitably resulted in a mad rush for the amassing of wealth and other resources, the stockpiling of arms and weapons, and in the acute struggle for economic survival that followed; the individual was alienated from the society at large, much to his own and the society's detriment.

Although the economic doctrines of the socialist and Communist countries were different from those of the capitalist societies, the consequences for the common man were no better, since he was degraded to the position of a slave, having to work like a robot without being able to question and to participate in the decisions of a dictatorial minority which belonged to the ruling Communist party.

With this as the backdrop, the Muslim people turned inward to their own legacy, and started to revive the ideology and the fundamental principles of their faith. They considered the inherent values of Islam and their validity in the modern world, and seemingly came to the conclusion that these principles are far more conducive to the physical as well as spiritual well-being of the human race. We discuss this below.

First, and foremost, we mention Islam's emphasis on every individual acquiring knowledge not only of himself and of this world, but also of the religious principles and the life hereafter. This has meant that priesthood was abolished in Islam (Sunni) and all clerical intermediaries between the human and the Creator were eliminated. This freedom for the individual to know and think for him-herself, leading to the democratization of knowledge and the liberation of human spirit, is believed by Muslims to be the greatest revolution in the history of mankind. It is noteworthy that, according to the traditional Muslim writings, prior to the advent of Islam the acquisition of knowledge was the privilege and prerogative of the priests and the ruling classes everywhere with the result that the common man was precluded and prohibited from acquiring knowledge under the threat of heavy penalties.

Muslims traditionally believe that the main reasons why their fore-fathers were leaders of a major portion of this world, not only in the politico-military sense, but also in the intellectual and spiritual sense, was because they followed this doctrine of universal education: observing, experimenting and contemplating the phenomena of nature, culminating in the discoveries of many of its underlying physical and chemical laws, and the harnessing of its forces for serving the needs of society. Accordingly, there is now an increasing emphasis on improving educational opportunity both in scientific-technical as well as in administrative-business fields.

Secondly, Islam enunciates emphatically the principles of universal social justice and equality, particularly before the law, and of human brotherhood. (And this predated the French and the American revolutions by more than a thousand years). It abolished all distinctions and discriminations on the basis of race, color and wealth. An ordinary citizen, an old woman for instance, once challenged the great Caliph Omar (in front of a full congregation) and asked him to show how he could have made a shirt for himself, being as tall as he was, if he had taken only a single, standard piece of cloth for himself just as was distributed to every other citizen. The Caliph's son stood up in the congregation to bear witness that, since his father had no other shirt and needed one badly, he (the son) had contributed his share so that the Caliph could make a shirt his size. Having such precepts and examples for social justice and equality in their own history and traditions, the Muslim world has been universal in its rejection of what it considers to be fake socialist and Communist doctrines for the

same. These beliefs provide a powerful impediment against Communist encroachment in the Muslim world which should continue to be effective well into the year 2000.

Thirdly, while fundamental human rights and freedoms are a relatively recent political phenomena in the West, for the Muslim people they were incorporated into their basic religious-administrative tenets 1400 years ago. The freedom and right to worship according to one's religion, the freedom from want, the freedom from fear (for those acting in accordance with the Commandments of God), freedom of association (assumed implicitly to be for a righteous cause and not for an evil purpose), have all been mentioned explicitly in the Quran. It is an article of faith with Muslims that everything in modern social philosophy which is considered to be beneficial for mankind has already been enunciated in the Quran and/or the traditions (Sunna) and sayings (Hadith) of the prophet. One fundamentally important difference between Islam and the two other major monotheistic religions (that is not generally appreciated) is that Islam attempts to be (and Muslims believe it is) more than just a religion. Rather, it is a complete moral, legal, and administrative code of behavior.

The ethical and moral principles of personal conduct and collective behavior occupy a co-equal status in Islam to the human rights mentioned above. The former specify, as it were, the obligations while, in contrast, the latter are the rights or the privileges. There is an injunction (in the Quran) that what a believer owes to the Lord can be waived and forgiven by Him, in his Infinite Mercy and Benevolence, but the believer will have to give a full reckoning for the last bit he owes to others and for any harm that he may have caused to another human being. In this regard, it must be

remembered that because Allah (God) is omnipotent and omniscient, one cannot escape the detection of a crime--although the state, which is initially charged with keeping law and order, lacks the knowledge and often the presence to adequately monitor such reprehensible actions. Thus, these moral constraints greatly strengthen law enforcement in Muslim countries. Moreover, the ever increasing level of crime in Western societies is taken as living proof of the moral and legal bankruptcy of both the Western and the Communist systems.

Thus, even though the Islamic code of conduct is well demarcated, it, nevertheless, is not austere. In particular, there is no asceticism in Islam (except for some minor sects) and a believer is free to enjoy the worldly blessings in moderation. This is particularly fortunate because several Muslim countries are being transformed into societies with abundance and their residents are amply free to enjoy the fruits of their economic development. The disparity between the haves and the have-nots is also restricted by the Islamic injunction that while worldly riches are blessings of the Lord, one is not to forget the needy and the deserving (among his relations and neighbors, first, and then in the community at large). It has been laid down (in the Quran) that no one reaches heaven if his neighbor starved while he banqueted. These are also the institutions of "Zakat" and "Bait-Ul-Mal," which are refined forms of collective arrangements for social security and wealth tax collection. One gives (pays tax) in order to gain one's spiritual salvation and not just merely to avoid jail! Thus, a Muslim is assured that if a society is organized on true Islamic principles, he would not be left destitute and neglected whatever his circumstances of birth. Of course, there are distortions and violations of these rules and principles in Islamic countries, just as there are

in any other modern society, but the difference is that Muslims continue to believe (as an article of faith) that if there are problems they result from an imperfect application of Islam's injunctions rather than any inherent inadequacy in Islam.

These and similar considerations suggest that Muslim people, all over the world, are likely to continue moving in the direction of adopting Islamic social and political systems while the present conditions prevail. Thus, we conclude that the impetus to return to the Islamic fundamentals and traditions will continue into the year 2000.

Future Scenarios

Here we briefly comment on the question as to whether the Muslim people are likely in the future to be grouped under one or more divisions. It seems that although there will continue to be a number of different Muslim countries with substantial racial and cultural differences, an essential unity is likely to prevail amidst the diversity. The religious concept of a single "muslim ummah" is based on the belief in one God, one Prophet and one Book. It has been explained in the Quran that the various nationalities and tribes are there only for the purposes of distinguishing individuals and groups, otherwise all Muslims constitute only a single family and brotherhood. Hence, not only ideologically, but also on practical grounds, if rational considerations prevail, the Muslim people may move toward forming an "Islamic world," with political and military cooperation between the various states. Theory and practice, dreams and reality, however, have a tendency to be divergent. Therefore, what finally transpires will depend on an interplay between the efforts of the Islamic glue that binds the Muslims and the "real-life" centrifugal forces that continually push them apart!

Implications of Islamic Revival for the United States

One of the basic principles of Islam in the social sphere is its permission, indeed its encouragement, to individuals to own private property. This is in keeping with the fundamental policy of the United States and against Communist doctrine. However, usury and the earning of interest are not allowed in Islam and its laws of inheritance, "Zakat" and "Bait-Ul-Mal," are structured such that the inordinate concentration of wealth is made less likely. The practice of speculation and capturing the means of production is also not approved by Islamic principles. In this respect, Islam will provide an independent stance vis-a-vis Western capitalism while standing firmly in opposition to the Communist forms of government. There are two other fundamental concepts which will lay the basis for future cooperation between the Islamic world and the United States as opposed to Muslim cooperation with the Communist bloc:

- a. Belief in religion as opposed to the atheistic doctrine of the Communist countries; and,
- b. freedom of the individual as opposed to the totalitarian regimentation of the Communist system of government.

Thus, it is more likely, on the whole, that the Islamic world will cooperate with the United States rather than with the Communist bloc. However, in order to try to ensure cooperation from the countries of the Muslim world, US policy planners must keep in mind the following factors:

- a. The Islamic world is no longer dormant; rather, it is assertive and is continuing to evolve more dynamically.

b. There are more than 40 independent sovereign Muslim states which are members of the United Nations and the nonaligned movement. This represents a considerable voting power in international forums.

c. The Muslims have become conscious of the need for unity and solidarity, and they have set up an Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) with the Islamic Secretariat at Jeddah.

d. The OIC has demonstrated that whenever a vital issue concerning any Muslim country is involved, it can convene a meeting of all Muslim countries at very short notice and reach a unanimous decision of a far-reaching political or economic character. The condemnation of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is a case in point.

e. The Islamic world has abundant material and human resources. Above all, it has oil, and it commands the allegiance of approximately one quarter of the human race.

These factors will become even more pronounced in the future and the United States must of necessity weigh them in its power equation. While the challenge to carefully balance traditional commitments against future concerns will be a great one, the United States will be helped by the fact that there is inherent overlap in interests between the United States and the Islamic world.

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